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THE SOVIET ATTITUDE AND TACTICS ON THE BERLIN PROBLEM

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HRP 93-3

THE SOVIET ATTITUDE AND TACTICS ON THE BERLIN PROBLEM

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the current Soviet attitude on the Berlin problem and the manner in which Soviet tactics may develop over the next several months.

THE ESTIMATE

The Current Soviet Approach To the Berlin Issue

1. The issue of West Berlin probably seems to the Soviets to be a key one in the May Summit meeting. Although they have subordinated it, at least in a formal sense, to the other agenda items of disarmament and a peace treaty for Germany, they probably do not expect any very far-reaching results at this first Summit on these latter problems. They probably think that there is a fair chance that the Western Powers will take some step toward accommodation on the Berlin issue if the Soviet case is pressed hard and skillfully.

2. Their hope for a success of some sort on Berlin in the Summit negotiations evidently rests on a genuine confidence in the strength of the Soviet position. Khrushchev undoubtedly hopes that the Western Powers will be disposed to make concessions because they recognize that the USSR is capable of and intends unilateral actions which, if reacted against with force, would involve them in greater risks than they are willing to take. Apparently contributing also to Soviet confidence is a continuing belief, which was manifest during the Geneva Foreign Ministers meetings, that the Western Powers may not be able to maintain a united front against Soviet demands.

3. Reflecting this appraisal of the situation, as well as an attempt to build up a strong bargaining position in advance of the Summit, there has been a noticeable hardening of Soviet public statements on the Berlin question in recent months. The threat of a separate peace treaty with East Germany has become more insistent and innuendoes about the consequences of this act for the Western position in Berlin more ominous. In thus attempting to build up pressure Khrushchev has come as close as possible to repudiating his pledges against issuing an ultimatum without actually doing so. The Soviets are probably aware that a too obvious and excessive use of pressure could have the effect of compromising the move for detente which they claim to want, or possibly even prejudice Western attendance at the Summit Conference. But their dilemma is that they realize that, without pressure at least in the background, the Western Powers have no incentive to consider the Soviet demands on Berlin seriously at all.

4. There is a sense, we believe, in which the Soviets do genuinely want a detente. In many respects, Khrushchev's internal policies and his plans for competing against Western influence in uncommitted areas would be

favored by some degree of cold war truce. Nevertheless, the Soviets' understanding of what constitutes detente continues to be defined in terms of Western concessions or, as they put it, "abandonment by the West of cold war positions." This is not all hypocrisy; Khrushchev probably really believes that the West should see the Soviet gains in power as a reason for finally accepting the status quo in Eastern Europe, adjusting the "abnormal" situation in Berlin, and giving at least de facto recognition to East Germany. While Khrushchev spoke on 31 October of "mutual concessions," this note has not been sustained, and there is currently no sign that the Soviets intend to approach the Berlin problem in a spirit of what the West would consider mutual accommodation.

5. We do not believe that the Soviets' desire for a relaxation of tensions is urgent enough to exclude tactics of very severe pressure on the West in pursuit of their objectives in Berlin. While the language of relaxation and peaceful coexistence is the same as that which has been employed by Soviet policy on other occasions during a negotiating phase, it now clothes a fundamentally different motivation. Negotiation is not now conceived, as so often earlier, as a tactical maneuver to cope with an enemy of superior power, but rather as a procedure to obtain peaceful delivery of the concessions which the Soviets consider their growing power entitles them to expect. This reasoning applies particularly to the case of West Berlin which the Soviets now see as an overextended Western position. In this mood, they will not be willing to accept for long a total rebuff to their demands without an attempt to increase the pressures very substantially.

Tactics at the Summit

6. When the Paris meeting opens the initial Soviet position is likely to be a maximum one—participation of the two German states, a peace treaty or treaties with them on the basis of the Soviet draft, and the Free City arrangement for West Berlin. We do not believe that Khrushchev will allow the issue of German participation to endanger the conference, and even the Soviet peace treaty draft is likely to be pushed only pro forma. As for Berlin itself, the Soviets already are on record as being willing to approach their objectives by stages, or through an interim agreement limited in time. Therefore, in negotiations concerning Berlin, the hard bargaining areas for the Soviets will be: (a) whether in principle the "abnormal" situation in Berlin should be altered (this will exclude explicit acceptance of the West's principle that its rights continue until Germany is unified); and (b) what first steps should be taken toward altering the "occupation regime" in West Berlin in the direction of a new status. Since the Summit conference will be of too brief duration to permit any intricate or prolonged maneuvers in developing a negotiating position, we expect that these essentials of the Soviet position will appear fairly promptly.

7. This approach probably excludes any Soviet design for a major tension-producing showdown in the Summit itself. It means that the Soviets will not insist upon achieving their full Free City plan at once. We believe that they would be satisfied to obtain undertakings which would mark Western consent to *begin* changing the situation in West Berlin. The Soviets may even be willing to accept a certain ambiguity about the meaning of the steps taken. They recognize that the ability of the West to maintain its position in Berlin depends, to a critical degree, on a belief on the part of the West Berlin population in the will and power of the West to preserve the freedom of the city. If the steps taken were viewed in Berlin as likely to lead ultimately to Western withdrawal, a major loss of confidence in the intentions of the Western Powers would result, and could undermine the situation politically and cause severe economic disruption. Unfavorable reactions in West Germany also would probably further contribute to the political and economic weakening of the situation in Berlin. In such an atmosphere, the Soviets would expect to move still more rapidly toward the outcome they seek.

8. Consequently, the steps for which they are most likely to press in order to give the impression of Western retreat will probably include: a reduction in Western troop strengths;

removal of West German political and administrative activities from the city; a formal repudiation by the Western Powers of any constitutional link between West Berlin and the Federal Republic; Soviet (and if possible East German) participation in a supervisory commission to control "subversive activities" and otherwise to "reduce tensions" in West Berlin during an interim phase of limited duration. We are unable to judge whether such steps, or which of them, would constitute the minimum Soviet position. It is possible that the real minimum would be simply an agreement to resume negotiations on Berlin with terms of reference which the Soviets could interpret as a step toward an eventual outcome favorable to them.

9. It is possible, but we think unlikely, that the Soviets would be willing to postpone their demands on the Berlin issue if they thought there were good prospects for progress on other issues. The disarmament field, taken as a whole, is too large and complex and the positions are too far apart to permit of anything the Soviets would be likely to call progress. It is possible that Western concessions on nuclear tests, or on partial disarmament steps in Germany, including restraints on West Germany, could have the effect of removing the Berlin demands from the center of the stage for the time being. However, any postponement of the Berlin issue achieved in this fashion would probably be of brief duration. The development most likely to lead Khrushchev to hold the Berlin issue in abeyance would be agreement for negotiations by a four-power commission or an all-German committee within a set time limit on the terms of a peace treaty with the "two Germanies."

Soviet Actions Post-Summit

10. If the Summit should result in a complete standoff on Berlin, and the Soviets are convinced that no movement in the Western position will be forthcoming, they would have two broad choices. They could agree to a formula for extending negotiation at some level without any Western commitment in principle to agree to a change in the Berlin situation. Probably they would think that to do this would be tantamount to calling off for the present at least the campaign on the Berlin issue which began in November 1958. They would probably not expect to be able to maintain sufficient psychological momentum or pressure if negotiations could thus appear to be extended indefinitely. Alternatively, they could proceed to make the separate treaty with East Germany. Their commitment to do this has been so explicit and so often repeated that we think it likely they have already resolved, barring a development at the Summit favorable to the Soviet demands, to take the step. They probably have not yet decided upon the timing or upon what "consequences" they should apply to the Western position in and access to Berlin.

11. A separate treaty would probably not be signed immediately after the Summit and a decent interval might also be allowed after the President's visit to the USSR, although an announcement that they were beginning consultations with interested parties for such a treaty might come at any time, even immediately after the Summit. In any case, if no prospect of a break in the stalemate appeared within a few months, it is likely that a separate treaty would actually be signed.

12. In taking this step, the Soviets would probably not intend immediately to put a squeeze on access to Berlin. They might use some technicality to delay transferring access controls for several months. And when the transfer took place, they would probably expect the Western Powers to continue to use the access routes under the "agent" theory, although the Soviets would not themselves concede that the East Germans were present at entry points as their agents. In this new phase their principal lever would be the threat of an unacceptable administration of access controls by the East Germans. We believe that even in this phase the Soviets would still seek to achieve their aim of altering the status of Berlin basically through Western agreement in negotiations. However, at some point, depending on their judgment of Western intentions, they might attempt to deny access or to impose conditions which in the Western view were equivalent to denial of access.